

Sowing Strokes and Reaping Blows: Scenic Proverbialization and Paroemial Cognitive

Patterning in *Brennu-Njáls saga*

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## Abstract

This study is a paroemiological consideration of *Brennu-Njáls saga* in which a set of repeated scenes that include or are associated with repeated proverbial utterances are examined in order to draw conclusions as to the compositional role of proverbs and paroemial material in the saga. The study begins with a brief discussion of proverb scholarship in which the intertextual nature of the proverb genre is established, moving into a discussion of certain important scenes in the saga narrative and their association with repeated proverbial utterances that exemplify and encapsulate the saga's overarching thematic concerns. It is shown that the proverb, as a compositional device in the saga, serves as the basis for repeated scenes that illustrate or act out the proverbs with which they are associated. Proverbs can be seen to indicate the ethics and motivations of associated characters as well as to provide an interpretive framework by which such proverb-scenes and the greater saga narrative could be understood by both the contemporary and modern saga audience. Furthermore, it is shown that the composer of *Njála* made use of the proverbial form to communicate both ostensibly traditional pre-Christian wisdom regarding the nature of Icelandic feud and social relations as well as later wisdom derived from the Christian scriptural tradition, indicating that the proverb as a compositional device was integral to the assimilation of Christian teachings into the literary depiction of Iceland's pagan past. The *paroemial cognitive patterning* of the saga audience allowed for the extensive use of the proverbial form in the comparison of Icelandic pre-Christian and Christian social ethics, and the proverbial form itself can be seen as a prominent compositional device in *Njála*.

## Acknowledgements

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This study is dedicated to Max, my close companion and dedicated friend.

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## List of Abbreviations

*TPMA*: *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi* = *Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*, eds. Samuel Singer, Werner Ziltener, and Christian Hostettler (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1995).

*ÍF*: *Íslensk Fornrit* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag).

Of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Brennu-Njáls saga* (or *Njála*, the common diminutive for the work) has long been recognized as one of, if not the most, literary and compositionally complex works in that corpus. A.U. Bååth's 1885 observation that the saga's author "had such a command over his material that he wrote down his first line having the last line within his vision"<sup>1</sup> has been largely accepted, and Einar Ól. Sveinsson has argued that "whoever undertakes a critical investigation of *Njála* must have a comprehensive knowledge of the *Íslendingasögur* as a whole, of their distinctive nature and artistic method."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in light of the remarkable compositional unity of *Njála*, it is difficult for modern readers to separate their attitude toward and reception of the work from those of a novel.<sup>3</sup> Bååth's observation points toward this interpretation of the work, believed to have been produced relatively late in the course of saga composition with suggestions ranging from 1270 to 1295,<sup>4</sup> one that distinguishes itself from the majority of the saga corpus by virtue of its narrative breadth, creativity, and impressive subtlety. From the story's first words, in which the introduction of Mörðr gígja and his daughter Unnr is immediately and atypically followed by a geographical leap west ("*Nú víkr sögunni vestr til Breiðafjarðardalir*"<sup>5</sup>), to its final words that break an otherwise consistently impersonal formula and point toward a deliberate and personal(ized) act of composition and of *telling* ("*ok lýk ek þar Brennu-Njáls sögu*"<sup>6</sup>), the text individuates itself within its genre, standing as a crafted work, not as compilation or accretion, but as composition. For Sveinsson,

from beginning to end *Njála* is an articulated, unified complex of events, all of which precipitate others. The initial impulse is not a single event, but many individual events which appear somehow to be harmless and insignificant. Each one draws its nourishment from its own roots and its own soil. It grows and develops, and soon sends

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<sup>1</sup> "Som helhet visar sig *Njála* i sin nuvarande form vara af en förf., som ägt sådant herravälde öfver sitt material, at då han nedskrifvit den första linjen, han gjort det, så att saga, med blicken fäst på den sista." Albert Ulrik Bååth, "Studier öfver kompositionen i några isländska ättesagor" (PhD diss., Lund University, 1885), 159-60.

<sup>2</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 45.

<sup>3</sup> "After the ungainly beginning in the Olaf biographies, the sagas consistently combine tradition with novel writing, but the proportions shift over time. The role of tradition diminishes, and the formative role of the authors grows. The Olaf sagas are predominantly records of tradition, but it is perhaps not too much to say that *Njáls saga* is predominantly a novel." Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 209.

<sup>4</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998), 191.

<sup>5</sup> "Now the saga shifts west to Breiðafjarðardal." Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, vol. XII of *Íslenzk Fornrit* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954), 6.

<sup>6</sup> "And here I end the saga of Burnt Njá." ÍF XII, 464. A variant reading, "And we end" ("*Ok lúku vér*"), is found in the X group of manuscripts: see ÍF XII, 464, note 1.

out shoots which take root far from their point of origin, and then become entwined and entangled with other unrelated events.<sup>7</sup>

Sveinsson discusses the wealth of phraseological and scenic repetition and variation in *Njála* that serves to reiterate theme and act as a “reminder” for the saga audience, binding together the saga’s narrative and highlighting its development of the living and complex social world suggested by Sveinsson’s organic metaphor.

When speaking of the “world” of the saga, it is important to note that the events described in *Njála* take place during the *Saga Age*, a period of roughly a hundred years from the mid-tenth to mid-eleventh century.<sup>8</sup> While some of the events and characters of the narrative are accepted as potentially historical – the existence of Njáll and his burning at Bergþórshváll being an example – the world of the saga itself is a literary creation, a perspective centuries-removed from the events being described. As Lars Lönnroth argues,

the ‘world’ of the saga is not defined by its historical setting. The term ‘world’ here is used in the sense of ‘world picture’: a system for interpreting the actual world so that its heterogeneous mass of data is reduced to simple categories, opposing ‘forces,’ and symbols for human values and beliefs . . .

It has often been observed that our world picture is dependent on our language, and this is no less true of the saga. The formulas and stock scenes [used in the composition of *Njála*] . . . determined the saga writer’s concept of the typical hero, a typical meeting at the Allthing, or a typical bloodfeud. Or perhaps we should say that his world picture determined his selection of formulas and stock scenes. Whichever came first, ‘world’ or ‘literary grammar,’ they are dependent on each other.<sup>9</sup>

The compositional elements of *Njála*, then, play a large part in communicating what kind of “world” the characters inhabit, and how the audience of the saga relates to its characters and the cultural and ideological frameworks within which their actions are to be understood. *Njála*’s composer implements these compositional elements expertly and often innovatively<sup>10</sup>, and they comprise much of the saga’s complex web of interrelated events that Sveinsson observes. Anne Heinrichs identifies in this network the “intertexture” of the written saga, through which a given

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<sup>7</sup> Sveinsson, *Masterpiece*, 54. See also Ian Maxwell, “Pattern in *Njáls Saga*,” in *Saga-Book* 15 (1957-61): 17-47.

“When we look back over the saga it seems massive and complete . . . and when we analyze it we find on every page evidence of precise shaping and subtle linking . . . There is indeed something almost geometric about much of it,” 22.

<sup>8</sup> Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 55-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> See Andrew Hamer, “Njáls saga and its Christian Background: A Study of Narrative Method” (PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2008), 1-3.



feature of a saga's text "points directly to another part of the text that appears sooner or later (sometimes surprisingly late). The linking is usually indicated by reappearance of the same or of similar phraseology."<sup>11</sup> While no small amount of studies have undertaken to detail the compositional unity of *Njála*, manifest in the saga's unbroken web of conflicts, foretellings, and patterns of repetition, this paper will highlight this compositional unity through the examination of certain repeated events and conflicts, deliberately related as they are through the extensive intertexture of the saga.

*Njála* quite productively repeats and echoes scenes throughout its narrative course, and a detailed study of this technique of repetition in its entirety would be far too extensive to undertake here. For the purposes of this study, a set of a few repeated scenes that are key to the development of the conflicts of Gunnarr and Njáll that make up the body of the saga proper will be treated in detail. As will be shown, these scenes are characterized by their replication of certain narrative conditions and phraseological echoes, the latter in the form of formulaically and recognizably paroemial utterances that signal or allude to and evaluate the scenes in question. These utterances can operate both overtly and indirectly to provide a key by which the audience may receive and interpret the scenes in question, their relationship to the saga's greater conflict, and, potentially, to the saga's overall theme. Indeed, the nature of the saga audience's reception and evaluation of a given scene and its role in the narrative as a whole, while somewhat difficult to determine from a modern perspective, must necessarily be discussed in some capacity in the course of this study.

In order to shed some light on how the proverb works as a compositional element of *Njála*, it may be helpful here to develop in greater detail the concept of the proverb itself and the formulaic language characteristic of proverb use in general. There has been no shortage of critical attention given to the understanding of exactly what a proverb is, how readers and listeners recognize it, and how and why it works. However, despite being a rhetorical device so ubiquitous and inherently recognizable and familiar, the proverb remains somewhat enigmatic when left uncontextualized by the situation surrounding its use. Syntactic and semantic approaches and folkloric considerations of proverb performance and perception have for decades worked toward an identification of the "incommunicable quality" that Archer Taylor alluded to

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Heinrichs, "'Intertexture' and its Functions in Early Written Sagas: A Stylistic Observation of 'Heiðarvíga saga, Reykdæla saga' and the Legendary Olafssaga," *Scandinavian Studies* 48.2 (1976): 127.

in his 1930 text, *The Proverb*.<sup>12</sup> However, in summary of the general areas of agreement in efforts to define the proverb, it is possible to claim that proverbs (or paroemes) are the individual sayings or phrases that act as summary utterances, affirmations, or demonstrations of the ostensible patterns of truth or understanding within a collective cultural experience.

Notably, this definition leaves out the concepts of traditionality and currency, both of which have dominated and problematized attempts to define the proverb since Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> These qualities have been shown to be problematic in that they are irredeemably ambiguous and subjective. Much of the critical work that attempts to incorporate them often comes to a standstill similar to Taylor's, asserting the decisive importance of qualities which impose subjective and unproductive limitations on what can be studied as proverbial without pre-existing textual evidence. The above definition is not exclusive of the concepts of traditionality or currency, however it does not regard them as necessary conditions for proverbiality. This decision can be primarily attributed to the necessity for recognition by the recipient of the formulaic constraints essential to the proverb genre. Shirley Arora has observed that "the listener's identification of a proverb as proverbial is actually a two-part process, involving first the abstract notion of the genre "proverb" as it is culturally or ethnically conceived, and secondly a means of assigning individual utterances to that genre."<sup>14</sup> Arora has also argued that

while I would agree that traditionality is indeed an indispensable feature both in the supercultural (the scholar's) definition of the proverb and in the ethnographic definition (the one recognized implicitly by the members of the cultural group) I suggest that in the *performance* of a proverb (its use in a verbal transaction between speaker and listener, performer and audience), traditionality is both unknown and irrelevant . . . lack of knowledge does not prevent that audience from "recognizing"—in the sense of

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<sup>12</sup> "The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. Those who do not speak a language can never recognize all its proverbs, and similarly much that is truly proverbial escapes us in Elizabethan and older English. Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk. At least so much of a definition is indisputable." Archer Taylor, *The Proverb* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 3.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent and detailed summary of past attempts to define the proverb, see Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook*. London: Greenwood Press (2004). Mieder largely retains the problematic inclusion of traditionality and currency as necessary conditions for proverbiality, but he also, albeit indirectly, acknowledges the difficulty of deriving a definition that satisfactorily quantifies these apparently unquantifiable qualities: "It is my contention that not even the most complex definition will be able to identify all proverbs. The crux of the matter lies in the concept of traditionality that includes both aspects of age and currency," 4.

<sup>14</sup> Shirley Arora, "The Perception of Proverbiality," *Proverbium* 1 (1984): 4. Arora gives an outline of the many "markers" of the proverb genre that structure the reception of an utterance as proverbial, whether or not it can be proven to be traditional. When unverifiable, the listener nonetheless experiences a "false recognition" based on his familiarity with the markers associated with proverb use.

acknowledging—the traditional authority that the proverb embodies, nor does it prevent the proverb performance from achieving success. What is essential for a successful performance is the existence of an ethnographic category of proverbs—sayings regarded as "traditional" conveyors of commonly held values, attitudes, and so on—some means of assigning statements to that category, even on first hearing. Notice that these two requirements apply specifically to the listener, that is, the audience.<sup>15</sup>

For Arora, proverbiality lies in the construction and performance of a recognizably proverbial utterance and its *reception* as proverbial by its audience.

Working from a basis similar to that of Arora, Stephen D. Winick has challenged the necessity of traditionality even at the 'supercultural' level of proverb scholarship. Winick provides an alternative definition of the proverb based upon its nature as a markedly formulaic utterance that can be reproduced, modified, and improvised while still retaining the formulaic qualities necessary to be recognized as proverbial:

It is neither necessary nor desirable to consider canonicity the essential component of proverbiality. All of the features that 'sometimes' occur in proverbs – phonetic, syntactic, and semantic poetic features, ascription to an ancestor, etc. – are techniques of intertextual reference, drawing our minds to previous proverbial utterances. Thus, on a more general level, all of the 'occasional' qualities of proverbs add up to one quality that is always there: rhetorical force imparted through intertextual reference.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, "an item such as an epic or a proverb can be *either* a memorized item stored in a traditional canon, *or* one that is conjured on the spot, composed as it is performed, according to a tradition of patterns, themes, and verbal elements."<sup>17</sup> The proverb is not a fixed text but an identifiable rhetorical mode, not a traditional text but a tradition *of* texts.

By virtue of its form, the proverb structures its reception as an utterance that comes from a communal and removed source. In their discussion of the interactional use of Yoruba proverbs, E. Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes present the example of proverb use by a parent in order to scold a child, noting that "proverbs may serve as impersonal vehicles for personal communication . . . imperative is externalized [from the speaker of the proverb] . . . The guilt or responsibility for

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<sup>15</sup> Shirley Arora, "The Archer Taylor Memorial Lecture. On the Importance of Rotting Fish: A Proverb and Its Audience," *Western Folklore* 48.4 (1989): 285.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen D. Winick, "Intertextuality and Innovation in a Definition of the Proverb Genre," in *Cognition, Comprehension, and Communication: A Decade of North American Proverb Studies (1990-2000)*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider-Verlag Hohengehren, 2003), 577.

<sup>17</sup> Winick, "Intertextuality," 583.

directing the child is projected on to the anonymous past, the anonymous folk.”<sup>18</sup> For Abrahams “the use of a proverb invokes an aura of moral rightness in a conversation; the comfort of a past community procedure is made available to the present and future.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, “proverbs work . . . because they *seem* to embody the wisdom of the past . . . it is the appearance of collective wisdom that is the most important of the persuasive characteristics of proverbs.”<sup>20</sup> Winick expands on this concept and, like Arora, discusses how being reminded of the proverb genre by what he calls its generic ‘indices of proverbiality’ “enables us to process the statement differently.” These indices isolate the statement from normal discourse, and “thus, proverbs are an example of *entextualized* utterances . . . and *seem to be separate texts* in a way that the discourse surrounding them does not.”<sup>21</sup> This entextualization “point[s] out its existence as a text and facilitat[es] its moving between contexts” and, in the performance of a proverb, the ‘indices of proverbiality’ also serve to place the utterance “within the interpretive frame in which the proverb should be understood.”<sup>22</sup> The ‘ethnographic category of proverbs’ that Arora identifies can thus be found in the ‘indices of proverbiality’ shared by a speaker/text and its audience. While these indices are not universal, a good many of them are recognizable between languages (poetic devices such as alliteration, rhythm, rhyme) and cultures (metaphor, framing devices, reference to shared or familiar mythologies or historical events). Within this context, Taylor’s “incommunicable quality” becomes a matter of the recognition of formulaic linguistic markers that are associated with the proverb genre and/or their relationship to forms, sources, and pieces of wisdom and understanding that are culturally or experientially familiar to the audience.

It is relatively unsurprising that paroemial material tends to feature functionally and stylistically in the compositional methods of the *Íslendingasögur*, as these texts have long been thought to have the origins of their stories in the oral traditions of pre-literate Iceland. Indeed, the presence of the many proverbs which appear throughout the *Íslendingasögur* points toward some manner of background in the oral transmission of stories regarding historical personages and the

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<sup>18</sup> E. Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes, “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore,” *American Anthropologist* 66.6 Part 2 (1964): 70.

<sup>19</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 81.320 (1968): 150.

<sup>20</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, “Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions,” in *Folklore and Folklife, an Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 122.

<sup>21</sup> Winick, “Intertextuality,” 589.

<sup>22</sup> Winick, “Intertextuality,” 594. See also Arora’s discussion of proverbial ‘markers’ in “Perception”.

events in which they were involved. The proverb is, as Walter J. Ong claims, the substance of pre-literate thought itself: “Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort . . . can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be ‘looked up’ in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them.”<sup>23</sup> However, while it is relatively unquestioned that the *Íslendingasögur* served to record and expand upon a pre-existing oral tradition that preserved, transmitted, and developed narratives, the extent to which this tradition can be found in the texts extant today has been and continues to be an inescapable matter of debate: “We no longer ask whether the saga is literary *or* oral, but what in the received saga can be ascribed to the literary author (whose use of written sources, both native and foreign, is firmly established) and what to a native tradition (the existence of which is the only explanation for the survival of traditional material through the preliterate period).”<sup>24</sup> As Carol Clover argues, “Every critical statement about the sagas – every statement, that is, beyond the purely descriptive – implies a theory of origins, whether it is acknowledged or not,”<sup>25</sup> and this study is no exception. While this study will not explore the problem of the origin of the saga in great detail, it can safely be accepted that the proverb is a rhetorical device that has its basis in pre-literate thought, and that its inclusion in the written *Íslendingasögur* indicates a persistence of this formulaic method of understanding into the literate period of Icelandic culture and signals in its literary productions an awareness of a pre-literate saga tradition.

Focusing on the paroemial material that the composer employs in the text is useful when speculating on the reception of the saga by its intended audience, as these units of rhetorical speech provide an effective key to the ways in which the composer may have intended his audience to receive his text. It has long been understood that the composers of the *Íslendingasögur* made use of recognizably proverbial material in order to establish theme: as early as 1896, Frederick York Powell observed in his discussion of proverbs in *Færeyinga saga* that “these idioms and saws, and such laconisms . . . are the very life-blood of a true Saga,”<sup>26</sup> and

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<sup>23</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 16-17. For a thorough discussion of saga origins, see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (London: Yale University Press, 1964) and Andersson, “The Long Prose Form in Medieval Iceland,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101.3 (2002).

<sup>25</sup> Carol J. Clover, “The Long Prose Form,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986): 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick York Powell, trans., *The tale of Thronð of Gate: commonly called Faereyinga saga* (London: D. Nutt, 1896), xxxix.

Guðbrandur Vigfússon remarked in his 1905 discussion of *Hrafnkels saga* that “these saws are to a Saga what the gnomic element is to a Greek play.”<sup>27</sup> *Njála* provides an excellent illustration of this statement, in that a detailed outline of proverbs (of which there are more than fifty, spoken by various characters<sup>28</sup>) and their use in the text would reveal both a wealth of pithy advice and calculated responses as well as recurring proverbs that form - or at the very least indirectly reinforce - the structural and thematic refrains of the text as a whole. Lars Lönnroth argues that among the other persuasive language and techniques used in the sagas are proverbs, uttered by “wise community spokesmen”, that are used to evaluate the situations within which they appear and, potentially, to indirectly state the composer’s own opinion of a given situation, its narrative role, or its moral quality. These spokesmen

have a tendency to state their views in the form of brief but succinct speeches, where they can make use of legal quotations, proverbs and other kinds of generalized statements which are often set off against the context through their more rhetorical form . . . such rhetoric may be very important in establishing a specific moral, even though it is not directly addressed by the narrator himself.<sup>29</sup>

Where it appears, a proverb can generally be seen as a cue to an audience that there is a specific perspective on the associated scene that the composer intends the audience to take. This perspective may assist the audience in better understanding the social or narrative role of certain characters, foreseeing subsequent events, or even recalling previous and similar narrative events or similar stories or events outside of the saga proper: Roger D. Abrahams observes that “there are certain proverbs that actually refer to a traditional story without telling it. They rely on the knowledge of the story by the hearer.”<sup>30</sup>

However, proverbs in *Njála* are not bound only to this strictly conventional aspect of their use. Proverbs may be used ironically or subversively, and are not always uttered by wise or benevolent characters for productive purposes, and thus cannot be taken at face value in the consideration of their intended influence on the audience’s reception. A ready example is Sigmundur’s response to Gunnarr’s warning not to act on his wife Hallgerðr’s inevitable goading,

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<sup>27</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Frederick York Powell, eds., *Origines Islandicae: a Collection of the More Important Sagas and Other Native Writings Relating to the Settlement and Early History of Iceland II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 492.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Cook, introduction to *Njáls’s saga*, trans. Robert Cook (Toronto: Penguin, 2001), xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Lars Lönnroth, “Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 42.2 (1970): 171-2.

<sup>30</sup> Abrahams, “Proverbial Expressions,” 122.

which is delivered in paroemial terms: “*Veldrat sá, er varar.*”<sup>31</sup> However, the statement appears rather insincere, as Sigmundr soon ignores Gunnarr’s warning, and an attentive audience would also immediately recognize the heavy irony of the statement in that by this point Gunnarr has repeatedly paid for his wife’s feud with Bergþora, and Hallgerðr’s later actions in spite of Gunnarr’s repeated protests will embroil him in the feud that leads to his eventual death.

It is also important to note that some scenes in *Njála* appear to be deliberately constructed as scenic illustrations of the proverbs with which they are associated. In the same fashion through which the fable can be considered as a text which unfolds and demonstrates a piece of proverbial wisdom,<sup>32</sup> certain scenes or episodes in a saga, or in some cases the entirety of a saga, can be seen to exemplify a proverb or set of proverbs that it contains. Indeed, for a sufficiently culturally-literate audience, the appearance of the proverb in truncated form, or simply the scene itself, may be enough to call forth the proverb in the minds of an attentive listener or reader: Neal Norrick observes that

for well known proverbs, mention of one crucial recognizable phrase serves to call forth the entire proverb. Let us designate this minimal recognizable unit as the *kernel* of the proverb . . . Proverbs bear much greater social, philosophical and psychological significance for speakers than do other idiomatic units . . . Consequently a speaker can call forth a particular proverb for his hearer with a brief allusion to its kernel.<sup>33</sup>

Such proverb-scenes point to the essential role of proverbs in the *Íslendingasögur*, both in terms of their composition and of their reception by their intended audience. In addition, they suggest that both the composer and the saga audience were aware of, and influenced by, this form of orally transmitted wisdom. Both the genre of the proverb and the many texts within that genre would have been familiar and recognizable to the saga audience, serving to structure the creation and reception of the literary works extant today.<sup>34</sup> In this way, an awareness of proverbial material, where it may appear in a given saga, is a crucial connection to the text as it was written and received by its contemporary audience.

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<sup>31</sup> “Whoever warns is blameless,” *ÍF* XII, 106 (*TPMA* 12, 355). Proverbs appearing in the *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters* (hereafter abbreviated as *TPMA*) will be given with their *TPMA* citation.

<sup>32</sup> See *Proverbia in Fabula: Essays on the Relationship of the Fable and the Proverb*, ed. Pack Carnes. Sprichwörterforschung Bd. 10. (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, NY & Paris: Peter Lang, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Neal Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean*, vol. 27 of *Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs*, ed. Werner Winter (Berlin, New York; Amsterdam: Moulton, 1985), 45.

<sup>34</sup> See Richard L. Harris, “The Eddic Wisdom of Hreiðarr the Fool: Paroemial Cognitive Patterning in an Old Icelandic þáttir” (forthcoming in *Speaking of Soth and Slaughter: Essays on Medieval Literary Speech Acts Inspired By the Works of Thomas A. Shippey*).

So far, it has been argued that the proverb is a rhetorical device that has its origin in pre-literate thought and is recognized as a traditional saying, attributed to an anonymous communal background, by virtue of structural and generic elements. The proverbial form is used to name, evaluate, and propose a solution to a recurring problem, and the recognition of an utterance or text as proverbial is dependant on an ‘ethnographic category of proverbs’ signalled by various ‘indices of proverbiality’ that constitute a proverb genre, serve to entextualize a given statement, and provide a framework both for the reception and interpretation of the statement and for the creation of new statements within the proverb genre. It has also been argued that, in the *Íslendingasögur*, proverbs are used as a compositional device that can operate directly or indirectly to structure the reception of a scene or the saga as a whole by a given audience. In particular, the composer of *Njála* made extensive compositional use of proverbs.

This study will now turn to a set of specific scenes for which associated proverbial material provides frameworks for their individual interpretation, the understanding of their narrative role, and of their relationship to the greater theme of *Njála* itself. It will be shown that *Njála*’s composer makes straightforward use of proverbial statements that have immediate relevance to the world of his saga and are very likely based in the traditional inventory of Germanic paroemial wisdom. However, the composer can also be seen to make use of paroemial statements that are adaptations of scriptural material, deliberately presented as utterances in the same genre as those of Germanic origin, suggesting that the proverb as a compositional device was used to assimilate material from disparate sources and present it in deliberately traditional and recognizable terms. While the concept of the proverb as a compositional device in the sagas will be expanded in theoretical terms further below, it is first necessary to treat these proverb-scenes in some detail, as we will see that they are deliberately presented by the composer as scenic realizations or illustrations of the proverbs with which they are associated.

The first of these proverb scenes to occur follows the slaying of Þórðr Freed-man’s son, foster-father of the Njálssons, by Sigmundr Lambason at the behest of Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir. As the second-last in the chain of retaliatory killings carried out by the servants and relatives of the feuding women, Hallgerðr and Njáll’s wife Bergþora, Sigmundr and his accomplices Skjöld and Þráinn Sigfússon are immediately vulnerable to the retaliation of the Njálssons. Indeed, it is clear from the chain of reciprocal killings that has happened thus far that the score will be settled by the opposing side, and Þórðr directly names Skarpheðinn Njálsson as his avenger before his



death.<sup>35</sup> When Sigmundr and his companions return to Hlíðarendi after the slaying, the admonishment he receives from Gunnarr's mother Rannveig once again confirms his fate of swift vengeance for the slaying, and does so in deliberately paroemial terms: "*Þat er mælt, at skamma stund verður hönd höggvi fegin, enda mun hér svá.*"<sup>36</sup> For the proverb to appear here, preceding the last killing in the feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra proper, is significant in that the audience has at this point experienced an extended example of the kind of feud that can be expected in the world of this saga. In spite of the escalating animosity between their wives, Gunnarr and Njáll remain steadfast in dedication to their friendship, offering increasing but equal amounts of compensation for each victim as they must. While the contrast between the respective reciprocal gestures of the husbands and their warring wives may generate something in the order of darkly comedic social critique, it also serves to forecast the narrative's chain of killings and ultimately ineffective legal compensations, and the proverbial prediction that precedes the killing of Sigmundr and Skjöld further renders this dynamic as socio-politically inevitable.

The repetition of this proverb twice more in the course of the saga further affirms this ostensible social truth of feud in *Njála*, one not uncharacteristic of the Family Sagas in general: Abrahams observes that "Proverbs are descriptions that propose an attitude or a mode of action in relation to a recurrent social situation. They attempt to persuade by clarifying the situation, by giving it a name, thus indicating that the problem has arisen before and that past practice has come up with a workable solution."<sup>37</sup> The proverb in question acts as a narrative refrain that draws the audience's attention not just to the events of the greater feuds spawned from this conflict as they occur, but to the nature of feud itself in the world of the saga. For the many characters that populate *Njála*, the inevitability of reciprocal feud violence is so deeply ingrained as to be referred to in the euphemistic and formulaic language of an inescapable fate: for characters like Njáll, who can foresee the manner of their own deaths, or characters like Gunnarr, who in spite of their resistance are inevitably pulled into conflicts, "*ferr þat sem má.*"<sup>38</sup>

The second instance of the proverb occurs when Höskuldr Bráinnsson (the Hvítanessgoði) learns of the slaying of Njáll's bastard Höskuldr Njálsson by Lýtingr and his brothers. The

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<sup>35</sup> *ÍF* XII, 109.

<sup>36</sup> "It is said that the hand's joy in the blow is brief, and indeed it will be here." *ÍF* XII, 109 (*TPMA* 10, 120).

<sup>37</sup> Abrahams, "Proverbial Expressions," 121.

<sup>38</sup> "Things will go as they will." *ÍF* XII, 67.

slaying is done in retribution for the killing of Þráinn Sígfusson, Lýtingr's brother-in-law and the father of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, by the Njálssons. Being outside Þráinn's immediate family, Lýtingr does not receive legal compensation in the settlement for the killing, however his belief of entitlement leads him to pursue the remaining alternative of blood revenge on Njáll's kin. Taking advantage of an occasion in which Lýtingr has all those entitled to take vengeance for Þráinn's killing feasting at his farm, Lýtingr implores the Hvítanessgoði to avenge his own father, but is met with a cold response; the same comes from the Sígfussons and the former companions of Þráinn that were forced to flee from the scene of the slaying, Grani Gunnarsson, Gunnarr Lambason, and Lambi Sigurðarson. Grani's response, that "*ekki mun ek fara at Njállssonum ok rjúfa sætt þá, er góðir men gerðu*,"<sup>39</sup> at once highlights the necessity of legal compensation to keep peace and its paradoxical inability to do so. Lýtingr's plans drive his guests away, leaving only him and his brothers, to whom he swears "*skal ek ok aldri una því, at engi komi mannhefnd eptir hann*,"<sup>40</sup> and Höskuldr Njálsson is slain soon after. When Lýtingr returns to Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði to inform him of the slaying, his response echoes Rannveig's: "*þú fort rasandi mjök. Mun hér sannask þat, sem mælt er, at skamma stund verður hönd höggvi fegin, enda þykki mér nú sem þér þykki ísjavért, hvárt þú munt fá haldit þik eða eigi*."<sup>41</sup> This killing shortly precedes the centrally-placed Conversion episode of *Njála* and leads to one of the most critically troubling scenes in the saga, in which Höskuldr Njálsson's son, Ámundi the blind, kills Lýtingr in retribution for the slaying of his father after similarly receiving no compensation for the killing. In addition to being problematic for the rather un-Christian, revenge-enabling miracle that seems to occur, the similarity in motivation for Lýtingr's and Ámundi's acts of vengeance and Njáll's approval of the latter, based unmistakably on the old ethic of feud, is a source of some confusion regarding the bearing of the new Christian ethic on the process of feud in Iceland. This scene will be discussed in more detail further below.

The final instance of the proverb occurs shortly after the burning of Njáll. Flosi Þórðarson and his party seek out Hallr of Síða, Flosi's father-in-law and one of the earliest in the saga to convert to Christianity, and ask him to accompany them to the Alþing and support them in the case of the burning of Bergþórshvol. The case is brought against Flosi and his companions

<sup>39</sup> "I will not attack the Njálssons and violate a settlement that good men made." *ÍF* XII, 249.

<sup>40</sup> "I shall never be content until revenge is had on him." *ÍF* XII, 249-50.

<sup>41</sup> "You acted very rashly. Here is proof that, as is said, the hand's joy in the blow is brief, and it seems to me now that you are considering whether you shall survive." *ÍF* XII, 253 (*TPMA* 10, 120).

by Kári Sölmundarson, the only potential aggressor to have escaped. Hallr's reply expresses his disapproval of the deed and his suspicion regarding the outcome of the case: "*Nú er svá orðit, sem mælt er, at skamma stund verður hönd höggvi fegin. Ok er sá nú allr einn í þínu föruneyti, er nú hefr eigi höfuðs, ok hinn, er þá fjýsti ins verra. En liðveizlu em ek skyldr at leggja til, alla slíka sem ek má.*"<sup>42</sup> Hearing this proverb for the third time, with both preceding utterances ringing true, the saga audience would undoubtedly have sensed the gravity of Hallr's statement and foreseen the doomed nature of the ensuing legal case, as every instance of legal attempts to stem the flow of blood in the saga has fallen short up until this point. Indeed, the very fact of Kári's survival of the burning, when read against the preceding examples of feud in the narrative, ensures the certainty of both legal and physical action against the burners. The inevitability of this outcome is further reinforced by Flosi's prophetic dream, described immediately prior to his visit to Hallr, in which a man named Járngrímr emerges from Lómagnúpr and calls out the names of Flosi's companions before informing Flosi that he will ride to the Alþing, and that "*Fyrst skal ek ryðja kviðu, en þá dóma, en þá vigvöll fyrir vegöndum.*"<sup>43</sup> Each utterance of the repeated proverb of the brief joy of blows, framed as it is each time by affirmations of its status as a common and proven saying (and thus intended to be received as a self-evident truth), directs the audience toward the persisting social reality of the inefficacy of law and the inevitability of reciprocal violence in the world of *Njála*.

Another, perhaps more subtle, affirmation of the veracity of this repeated proverb for an observant audience would have been found in its peculiar literalization through the character of Hallgerðr. A keen reader or listener would recall that there are three men who pay with their lives for the blows they deal to Hallgerðr, as each of her husbands strike her face only to be killed shortly afterward. Þorvaldr and Glúmr are killed by Hallgerðr's jealous and overbearing foster-father, Þjóstólfr, and Gunnarr is indirectly slain by Hallgerðr herself when she refuses to give up a lock of her hair to create a bowstring for Gunnarr to defend himself with during the saga's first climactic scene, the attack on Hlíðarendi. Indeed, it is Hallgerðr's preceding actions that lead to the feud through which Gunnarr will be killed, as will be discussed in further detail below. At both the human and the greater social levels of the saga, then, the proverb "the hand's

<sup>42</sup> "Now it is as is said, that the hand's joy in the blow is brief. And now all in your party do not lift their heads, while before they sought trouble. But I am bound to assist in any way I can." *ÍF* XII, 349 (*TPMA* 10, 120).

<sup>43</sup> "First I shall challenge the jury, and then the courts, and then clear the field for fighters." *ÍF* XII, 347-8.

joy in the blow is brief” rings as true as Gunnarr’s enchanted *atgeir*.<sup>44</sup> The status of this proverbial warning-*cum*-admonition as a self-evident truth in the world of *Njála* is cemented through the saga’s composition, a formulaic affirmation of the dynamic of feud and a recurring scene unto itself.

In the introduction to his translation of *Njála*, Robert Cook observes that in *Njála* “warnings and advice are often the equivalent of predictions of violence.”<sup>45</sup> When these statements are expressed in proverbial form, they are doubly so, both as intertextual cues to an attentive audience to expect violence and as more general observations regarding the pressures of the saga’s social world. The statement by Abrahams cited above is particularly relevant in light of this reading, although it is also problematized: the utterance of the proverb does indeed name and evaluate a recurring social situation in an attempt to manage and advise the recipient on its accommodation in some capacity, but when these proverbs come too late and operate as self-fulfilling prophecies, as they so often do in *Njála*, they serve a different purpose than the one Abrahams identifies. For the characters of *Njála*, the collective wisdom embodied in the proverbial utterance does not provide a “workable solution”. Rather, the proverb stresses the inevitability of the conflict that it serves to identify. For the composer of *Njála*, who places so many of these formulaic pieces of oral wisdom in the mouths of his characters, the proverb is an affirmation of the inevitability of the conflict it names in the social world that has named it. Such belated wisdom acknowledges that there is no workable solution to the proverbial situation, as it stems from a flawed system. However, to understand fully the significance of the flaws in this system, they must be placed into a larger frame of reference. The next proverbial scenes to be discussed will serve this purpose.

The second set of repeated scenes are those of Gunnarr and Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, both of whom are attacked as they sow their fields. Due to Gunnarr’s generosity during a time of famine, he runs short of food and supplies and is forced to pay a visit to the neighbouring farm of Otkell Skarfsson to purchase some. However, as Otkell’s deceitful friend Skammkell “*var tillagailr*,”<sup>46</sup> Gunnarr is refused, and instead offered the purchase of an Irish slave, Melkólfr, whose bad qualities go unmentioned by Otkell. In a display of his magnanimity, Gunnarr purchases the slave. A clever audience, having previously observed Hallgerðr’s penchant for

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<sup>44</sup> Usually translated as “halberd”.

<sup>45</sup> Cook, introduction, xxii.

<sup>46</sup> “was advising him maliciously.” *ÍF* XII, 121.

convincing disreputable individuals to do her dirty work, would already detect the tragic irony of Gunnarr's conduct in this scene. Gunnarr attempts to deal with others fairly and avoid conflict, but Hallgerðr will continue to drag him into conflict, and with less reputable and peaceable individuals than Njáll. Indeed, Hallgerðr soon persuades Melkólfr to return to Otkell's farm, steal his food and burn their storage shed to conceal the theft. The plan is temporarily successful, but when Gunnar discovers the theft he strikes Hallgerðr, injuring her pride and sealing his fate. Soon afterward, Melkólfr's belongings are found near the farm, leading Otkell to believe that the burning was a cover for theft. The ensuing legal case, entirely due to the meddling and ill advice of Skammkell, comes remarkably close to combat, but on the day of the Alþing Skammkell lies ill in his tent, and his absence is enough to allow the case to be completed without recourse to violence. Gunnarr is awarded self-judgment, and as part of his terms he advises Otkell never to provoke him again.

Thus, Gunnarr's magnanimity is undercut by Hallgerðr's ill nature, placing Gunnarr in a precarious position for one who wishes to maintain peace. With the stage set for the ensuing conflict, a scene begins in which Gunnarr sows his field alone, peculiarly equipped: "*ok hafði kornkippu í annarri hendi, en í annarri handæxi. Hann hefir spora á fótum ok hleypir neðan um sáðlandit, ok sér hvárrgi þeira Gunnars annan.*"<sup>47</sup> As Gunnarr rises he is run down by Otkell - who has lost control of his horse - and is cut on the ear by Otkell's spur. Enraged by Skammkell's ensuing taunts, Gunnarr promises the two that "*þá er vit finnumsk næst, skaltú sjá atgeirinn.*"<sup>48</sup> Gunnarr soon takes his revenge, and when he returns to Njáll to seek his counsel, Njáll's prophetic response points toward Gunnarr's inevitable death as a result of feud conflict: "*'Villt þú, at ek segja þér þat,' segir Njáll, 'er eigi er fram komit? . . . Mun þetta upphaf vígaferla þinna.*"<sup>49</sup>

While this sowing scene contains little in the way of proverbial direction for its understanding, it is reproduced almost exactly in the death of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, and the paroemial material that appears in association with this reproduction will shed far more light on the role of these respective scenes. It is no coincidence, then, that the audience is told of Höskuldr's birth only three chapters later. This correlation appears to be a rather subtle use of

<sup>47</sup> "and [Gunnarr] had a seed-basket in one hand, and in the other a hand-axe. He went to his field to sow and put his fine cloak and axe on the ground, and sowed for a while." *ÍF* XII, 134.

<sup>48</sup> "The next time we meet, you shall see the halberd." *ÍF* XII, 134-5.

<sup>49</sup> "Would you like me to tell you of that which has not yet happened? . . . This will be the beginning of your career of killings." *ÍF* XII, 139.

literary foreshadowing, as Cook notes in his edition that Höskuldr is not known outside of *Njála*.<sup>50</sup> The implication of this detail is that Höskuldr, a character so crucial to the narrative leading up to the burning in the second half of *Njála*, is either overlooked in all other extant written sources, or a fabrication by the composer who serves a complex narrative purpose. The latter is evident when Höskuldr's own sowing scene is considered.

Njáll becomes foster-father to Höskuldr shortly after Skarpheðinn Njálsson kills Höskuldr's father, Práinn. From the beginning, Höskuldr shows himself to be atypical, representing the realization of the relative peace of lawful reparation that Njáll and Gunnarr, among others, have so far failed to maintain: when Njáll asks Höskuldr if he knows who killed his father, the boy replies "*Veit ek, at Skarpheðinn vá hann, ok þurfu vit ekki á þat at minnask, er sætzk hefir á verit ok fullar bætr hafa fyrir komit.*"<sup>51</sup> By the end of the chapter, enough time has elapsed for Höskuldr to be fully grown, and Njáll attempts to arrange a marriage for Höskuldr with Hildigunn Starkaðardóttir, but she will not marry him unless he has a *goðorð*. Finding no one willing to sell his position to Höskuldr, Njáll's solution is remarkable:

*Liðr nú sumar til alþingis. Þetta sumar váru þingdeildir miklar; gerði þá margr sem vant var at fara til fundar við Njál, en hann lagði þat til mála manna, sem ekki þótti líkligt, at eyddusk sóknir ok svá varnir, ok varð af því þræta mikil, er málin máttu eigi lúkask, ok riðu menn heim af þingi ósáttir.*

*Liðr nú þar til, er kemr annat þing. Ferr Njáll til þings. Ok er núfyrst kyrrt þingit allt þar til, er Njáll talaði, at mönnum væri mál at lýsa sökum sínum. Margr mæltu, at til lítills þætti þat koma, því at engi kæmi sínu máli fram þótt til þinga væri stefnt, - "ok vilju vér heldr," segja þeir, "heimta með oddi ok eggju." "Svá má eigi," segir Njáll, "ok hlýðr þat hvergi at hafa eigi lög í landi. En þó hafið þér mikit til yðvars máls um þat, ok kemr þat til vár, er kunnum lögin ok þeim skulum stjórna. Þykki mér þat ráð, at vér kallimsk saman allir höfðingjar ok talim um."*<sup>52</sup>

The ensuing discussion, led by Njáll, leads in this fictional account to the creation of the *fimmtardómr* (Fifth Court), from which Höskuldr gains a newly created *goðorð*. Njáll, typically a

<sup>50</sup> Cook, Ch.59, endnote 1, pp. 320.

<sup>51</sup> "I know that Skarpheðinn killed him, but we don't have to mention that, since the matter was settled and full compensation was paid." *ÍF* XII, 237.

<sup>52</sup> "The summer moved on until time for the Alþing. That year there were many lawsuits. As usual, many people came to consult Njáll, but he gave advice which, unlikely as it seemed, ruined both prosecution and defense and led to much wrangling when cases could not be settled, and men rode home from the Thing unreconciled. Time passed until the next Thing. Njáll went to it. Everything was calm at first, until Njál declared that it was time for men to give notice of their lawsuits. Many said that this was hardly worth it, for even cases brought to the Thing were getting nowhere – 'and we would rather,' they said, 'press our claims with point and blade.' 'That you must not do,' said Njáll, for it will not do to be without law in this land. But there is much truth in what you say, and those of us who know the law should shape it. The best step, it seems to me, is to call a meeting of all the chieftains to talk about it." *ÍF* XII, 241-2; The English passage appears as translated by Cook, *Njals saga*, 165.

reliable and eminent lawyer, deliberately provides counterproductive council in an effort to ‘shape’ the law for Höskuldr’s benefit.<sup>53</sup> This strategy is remarkable, in that Njáll is repeatedly spoken of as incapable of lying on account of his foresight; indeed, the scene in which Njáll takes Höskuldr as his foster-child contains a direct reference to this, as the young Höskuldr states that “*ek veit, at þú ert forspár ok ólyginn.*”<sup>54</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that the legal wrangling enabled by the same Fifth Court, designed as something of a court of appeals and the handling of cases of “perjury or false verdict . . . as well as cases involving the offer or acceptance of payment for assistance in legal suits and giving shelter to slaves and debtors,”<sup>55</sup> will lead to the convoluted and unproductive proceedings of Kári’s case against Flosi for the burning at Bergþórshváll - proceedings that end in combat at the Alþing, the violent realization of the saga’s series of failed legal attempts to break the chain of feud. This chain of events adds both a poignancy and a heavy irony to Njáll’s earlier utterance of a proverb, “*með lögum skal land vårt byggja, en með ólögum eyða,*”<sup>56</sup> which a keen audience would doubtlessly have recalled upon hearing Njáll state that “*hlýðr þat hvergi at hafa eigi lög í landi.*” Höskuldr is shown to be deeply tied to - and offer a potential solution to - the audience’s understanding of the flawed legal system of Iceland, one that cannot effectively settle disputes without their eventual eruption into blood feud, even after the introduction of Christianity to Iceland.

When the inveterate pagan Valgarðr the Grey returns to Iceland, he finds the *goðorð* he gave to his son Morðr has waned in its authority. As Morðr explains, the creation of the Fifth Court caused the loss of many of his supporters, who went over to Höskuldr. Enraged, Valgarðr devises a plan by which Morðr will foster discontent between the Njálssons and Höskuldr that will lead to the latter’s death by re-igniting animosity over the killing of Höskuldr’s father Þráinn. Morð is unsuccessful in convincing Höskuldr of any ill intent on behalf of his foster-brothers, and in spite of Flosi’s warnings of danger he shows himself to be more interested in peace than the continuation of a feud settled so long ago: “*heldr vildir ek vera ógildir en margir hlyti illt af mér.*”<sup>57</sup> Flosi’s parting intertextual gift of a cloak to Höskuldr completes the pieces necessary for the next sowing scene, as well as the retaliation afterward, when the widowed

<sup>53</sup> See Yoav Tirosh, “Viga Njáll: A New Approach Toward *Njáls saga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 86.2 (2014): 213-14.

<sup>54</sup> “I know that you can see the future and never lie.” *ÍF* XII, 237.

<sup>55</sup> Cook, *Njal’s Saga*, 166.

<sup>56</sup> “With law our land shall rise, but with lawlessness it will perish.” *ÍF* XII, 172 (*TPMA* 4, 428).

<sup>57</sup> “I would rather die uncompensated than for many to suffer harm through me.” *ÍF* XII, 279.

Hildigunn places the still-bloody cloak around Flosi and implores him to take vengeance for her husband's slaying.

However, the Njálssons are eventually convinced of Morðr's lies, and they agree to slay Höskuldr on the condition that Morðr accompanies them. The Njálssons, Kári Sölmundarson, and Morðr come upon Höskuldr on his farm at Hvítaness in the morning, and the description of his actions bears a remarkable resemblance to the earlier scene in which Gunnarr is ridden over: "*Í þenna tíma vaknaði Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði; hann fór í klæði sín ok tók yfir sik skikkjuna Flosanaut; hann tók kornkippu ok sverð í aðra hönd ok ferr til gerðis síns ok sár niðr korninu.*"<sup>58</sup> The areas of overlap between the two scenes are remarkable: both Gunnarr and Höskuldr are described as being equipped with fine cloaks, seed-baskets in one hand and weapons in the other. However, their behaviour in these scenes is very different, and Andrew Hamer argues that "the author of *Njáls saga* intended the reader to compare the actions and characters of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði."<sup>59</sup> Höskuldr turns to flee rather than brandishing his sword as Skarpheðinn approaches, and as the first blow is struck against the Hvítanessgoði, his final words espouse a deliberately Christian response to violence: "*Guð hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yðr!*"<sup>60</sup> In comparing the two scenes, one can see a transition from the pre-Christian ethic of retaliatory violence in the verbal brandishing of Gunnarr's *atgeir* to a markedly Christian ethic of forgiveness. However, as will be shown, one cannot access the full interpretive potential of these scenes and their bearing on the work as a whole without recourse to the paroemial material with which they are associated.

The responsibility to avenge Höskuldr's slaying falls to Flosi, who condemns it in markedly paroemial terms: "*Þat hefir nú víst at höndum borit, at ek mynda gefa til mina eigu, at þetta hefði eigi fram komit; er ok illu korni sáit orðit, enda mun illt af gróa.*"<sup>61</sup> Njáll later echoes this phrase in his own assessment of the ensuing legal case in claiming that "*Svá sýnisk mér sem þetta mál sé komit í ónýtt efni, ok er þat at líkendum, því at af illum rótum hefir upp runnit.*"<sup>62</sup> In these passages, Andrew Hamer identifies scriptural references to the Parable of the Sower, and

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<sup>58</sup> "At that time Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði woke; he put on his clothes and put his cloak, Flosi's gift, over himself; he took a seed-basket and a sword in the other hand and went to his field and sowed grain." *ÍF* XII, 280.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Hamer, "Christian Background," 176-7.

<sup>60</sup> "God help me, and forgive you!" *ÍF* XII, 281.

<sup>61</sup> "It is true that I would give everything I own so that this would not have come to be. But where evil seed has been sown, evil will grow." *ÍF* XII, 288 (*TPMA* 9, 422).

<sup>62</sup> "It appears that this case has reached an impasse, which is to be expected since it sprang from evil roots." *ÍF* XII, 309. The English passage appears as translated by Cook, *Njáls Saga*, 207.



arguing that this interpretation provides the necessary framework through which Gunnarr and Höskuldr's sowing scenes can be compared. As Hamer argues, the invited comparison between the two sowing scenes and the conduct of the sowers allows the audience, metaphorically, to consider what each has sown and what he will reap as a result: "Gunnarr's sowing marks the moment when self-destructive anger, under the old law of revenge, is born in him; Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði's sowing marks the moment when self-sacrificing love in the new law of Christ begins to act."<sup>63</sup> Hamer points to Christian metaphors of spiritual growth and harvest in the Parable of the Sower to show how Gunnarr's scene of sowing, the point at which he chooses to take the vengeance prohibited by Njall, highlights the quite pagan seeds he has sown through his embroilment in feud. In contrast, we see Höskuldr sinking to his knees before the Njálssons and Kári, offering a double-prayer for himself and his killers rather than retaliating. Höskuldr dies a Christian's death, while Gunnarr falls in battle, doomed by Hallgerðr's proud refusal to lend a lock of her hair to serve as a bowstring.

Hamer points to utterances from multiple characters containing scriptural echoes that reinforce these associations and very likely served as interpretive cues for an informed audience. After Gunnarr has successfully strong-armed Hrútr Herjólfsson, the former husband of Gunnarr's aunt Unnr, into repaying her dowry, Gunnarr is told by Höskuldr Dalla-Kolsson, "*njót þú sem þú hefir aflat*."<sup>64</sup> Though the remark has been translated variously, Hamer identifies the possible metaphorical use of the verb *afla* as "to gather (fruit)," thus reading the remark "benefit as you have gathered fruit," an interpretation that points toward Gunnar's later decision to violate his outlawry by remaining to harvest, to gather the fruit of what he has sown.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Njáll and Flosi's metaphors of bad seed and evil growth both echo the Sermon on the Mount from Matt. vii, 18-19, which Hamer gives as "A good tree cannot make evil fruit nor an evil tree make good fruit; every tree that does not yield good fruit will be cut down and sent into the fire,"<sup>66</sup> pointing to the threatened burning at Hlíðarendi and the burning at Bergþórshváll that are the eventual result of these respective sowing scenes.

While Hamer's argument is persuasive, it might be added that the utterances in which Hamer identifies scriptural echoes behave proverbially; both Njáll and Flosi condemn the slaying

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<sup>63</sup> Hamer, "Christian Background," 181.

<sup>64</sup> ÍF XII, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Hamer, "Christian Background," 151-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

of Höskuldr in the same metaphorical terms, statements that evaluate and affirm the causal logic of the event - where evil seed has been sown, evil will grow - through reference to a greater body of communal wisdom, the Christian scriptural tradition. The earlier observation of Abrahams, that “there are certain proverbs that actually refer to a traditional story without telling it[, and] rely on the knowledge of the story by the hearer,”<sup>67</sup> has particular significance here, since these sowing scenes and their associated proverbs can be seen as examples of this rule.

The subject of sowing and reaping being acted out on two separate occasions in the saga, both concerning the use of lies and deceit to incite conflicts and their accordance with the paroemial statement of evil growth in the saga, indicates a conscious effort on the part of the composer to link paroemial material to scenes of which it is emblematic - fictionalized ‘unfoldings’ of paroemial wisdom. In two instances in *Njála* a claim given in paroemial form is actualized, evaluating and encapsulating a recurring situation in the text—the sayings become representative of those scenes which are unfolded examples of the results of lying to engender conflict, and thus serve the role of proverb. Furthermore, we can see a reference in the formula of these utterances to a proverb that appears twice earlier in the saga: “*Illa gefask ills ráðs leifar*.”<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, both of the times the proverb occurs, it is uttered in condemnation of Hallgerðr’s actions, first in response to the slaying of her husband Þorvaldr and second by Gunnarr, who scolds his wife for expecting him to avenge the slaying of Sigmundr. Most interestingly, both of the proverb’s occurrences fall before the Conversion episode, at which point the same proverbial formula is used to convey the same message in deliberately Scriptural terms by Njáll and Flosi, with their metaphor of spiritual growth and the lies of Skammkell and Morðr (respectively) as sown seeds. Although the language changes in the post-Conversion portion of the narrative, the oral formulas containing the framework by which these events are understood remain the same. This can be seen as a conscious compositional use of the proverbial form, drawing an intentional link between pre and post-Conversion states and further emphasizing the post-Conversion persistence of the socially disruptive ethic of feud. Hamer notes that “there would have been little point in a saga author’s wishing to give his audience a Christian (or any other) message, if the audience were unable to recognise it.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the ability of the audience to recognize the source material of these sowing scenes is greatly enhanced by the embedding of this scriptural

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<sup>67</sup> Abrahams, “Proverbial Expressions,” 122.

<sup>68</sup> “Evil results from evil plans.” *ÍF* XII, 37; see also “*illa gefask ill ráð*”, 117 (*TPMA* 9, 187).

<sup>69</sup> Hamer, “Christian Background,” 253.

material in paroemial terms. While these condemnatory statements may not be demonstrably traditional texts, they make use of a traditional form, operating as summary utterances that evaluate the associated scenes and invite their comparison through allusion to a greater body of communal wisdom. These utterances can be seen to operate proverbially in the way that Arora and Winick describe, as their traditionality as texts is irrelevant to their effectiveness as proverbial utterances.

As has been noted by other scholars, a constant issue in the background of *Njála* is the inefficacy of the existing legal system in stemming feud conflict. Even after conversion to Christianity, the feuds of *Njála* continue, essentially unabated, as the pre-Christian ethic of honour still directs the actions of feuding parties. The requirements of maintaining honour, which so often involve violent retaliation against offending parties, can be seen in the language of fate used throughout the saga. William Ian Miller observes that

It is an often unexamined scholarly view that Fate is some controlling force in *Njála* and other sagas. People do indeed talk fate-talk in the sagas, but they show very different levels of belief in it . . . [and] none of the characters in [*Njála*] act as if they do not have options. They do not act as if they are merely playing parts in a done deal, though occasionally they may talk that way, such talk being mostly a sign of the saga's preference for understatement and its commitment to the wit of pessimism.<sup>70</sup>

However, while the characters of the saga do behave as though they have the freedom of choice in directing their actions, their 'free' choices are almost always necessarily concerned with the continuation of feud. Miller's 'fate-talk' takes the form of dreams (Flosi's aforementioned dream of Járngímr), prophecies and foretellings (Njáll's aforementioned prediction of Gunnarr's 'career of killings'), and, often, formulaic anticipatory statements that appear to border on the fatalistic ("ferr þat sem má"<sup>71</sup>). Fate appears not as a directing force itself, but as a rhetorical excuse for the directing forces of social pressure. By his horse stumbling at the beginning of his outlawry, Gunnar is led to survey his fields and decide to stay in Iceland to complete the harvest, leaving himself open to attack. Lýtingr ignores the fixity of the settlement for Þráinn Sígfusson's slaying and, against all advice, slays Höskuldr Njálsson. As is seen in the particularly problematic scene with Ámundi the blind, even supposedly divinely-inspired characters still choose feud over forgiveness. Andrew Hamer has noted that the immediate withdrawal of

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<sup>70</sup> William Ian Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody?: A Reading of Njáls saga*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>71</sup> *ÍF* XII, 67.

Ámundi's blessing of sight constitutes a just retribution for the 'quasi-convert', whose actions represent a transitional period in the adoption of the Christian ethic in Iceland.<sup>72</sup> However, Hamer neglects to engage with Njáll's response to the slaying, one which seems markedly in support of the old ethic: "*'Ekki má saka þik um slíkt,' segir Njáll, 'þvi at slíkt er mjök á kveðit, en viðvörunarvert, ef slíkir atburðir verða, at stinga eigi af stokki við þá, er svá nær standa.*"<sup>73</sup> This passage exhibits a remarkably similar perspective to that which Njáll espouses at his burning when offered mercy by Flosi: "*Eigi vil ek út ganga, þvi at ek em maðr gamall ok lít til búinn at hefna sonna mina, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.*"<sup>74</sup> Vésteinn Ólason argues that Njáll's response masks the Christian assumption that the burning will have a redemptive effect on him and his sons:

behind Njáll's own explanation of his conduct, which he knows will be understood by those able to hear him, there lies a more profound impulse. He wants to die with his sons in the hope that they will all receive forgiveness for their sins. His death signals a rejection of the old order and marks a step into the new one . . .

Christianity reveals itself in several ways . . . in Njáll's benevolence and, especially, in his eagerness to persuade his sons to burn with him inside the farmhouse.<sup>75</sup>

Hamer further argues that Njáll "certainly engineers the deaths of his sons, but does so, not in order to ensure revenge for the killing of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði according to the old ethic, but . . . in order to impose purgative justice upon them, the necessary preliminary to the mercy of that God."<sup>76</sup> Njáll's "metaphorical disarming" of his sons by bringing them into the house to burn with him, as Hamer observes, "parallels the self-sacrificing peaceableness of his foster-son Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, who casts away his sword when attacked by the Njálssons."<sup>77</sup> In this way Njáll exemplifies the new ethic that, when applied, will reform the broken law of Iceland and allow the reconciliation between Kári and Flosi that concludes the saga, contrasting "between the values of the new law, that shows mercy in that it refuses to retaliate, and an outdated ethic that aims to satisfy the demands of justice alone through retaliation in like

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<sup>72</sup> Hamer, "Christian Background," 124-134.

<sup>73</sup> "'You are not to be blamed for that', said Njáll, 'for such things are preordained, and when they occur are a warning not to decline the claims of close kin.'" *ÍF* XII, 274. The English passage appears as translated by Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 182-3.

<sup>74</sup> "I will not come out, for I am an old man and hardly prepared to avenge my sons, and I will not live in shame." *ÍF* XII, 330.

<sup>75</sup> Ólason, *Dialogues*, 200, 204.

<sup>76</sup> Hamer, "Christian Background," 245.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

measure”<sup>78</sup>:

This simple, familiar Christian message: ‘follow the divine model in exercising judgement through both justice and mercy’, provides a consistent ethical viewpoint from which the reader of *Njáls saga* may evaluate characters’ actions, including . . . the blind Ámundi Höskuldsson’s revenge; [and] Njáll’s apparent tactical error in ordering the men of his household indoors.<sup>79</sup>

However, Njáll’s response to Ámundi’s vengeance against Lýting is still somewhat problematic. Although being one of the first to convert to Christianity, indeed converting before the missionary Þangbrandr even appears in Iceland, Njáll’s praise of his grandson’s actions falls short of exhibiting the ethic that Hamer identifies, in particular when held in the light of Höskuldr’s refusal to violate the settlement made for his father or, later in the narrative, Hallr of Síða’s choice to forego compensation for the death of his son in order to re-establish peace at the Alþing. At the point of Ámundi’s vengeance, so soon after conversion, it seems that Njáll has not fully integrated his understanding of Iceland’s law with the new-found Christian ethic.

Hamer is correct in identifying the Ámundi episode as a transitional stage in the acceptance of the Christian ethic, although it is perhaps productive to supplement the understanding of the scene with the previously discussed encapsulation of the old ethic of feud, the proverb “*at skamma stund verður hönd höggvi fegin*.” It is noteworthy that Njáll is in support of his sons effecting the fulfillment of this rule on multiple occasions preceding the conversion episode. The night after Njáll and his sons learn of Hallgerðr and Sigmundr’s scatological insults against them, Njáll is woken by the sound of an axe ringing against a wall - likely a deliberate echo of the the *atgeir* that Gunnarr wins in his travels from the viking Hallgrímr, said to ring before it strikes a killing blow - and Njáll follows his sons out to inquire as to their purpose. Their father is unconvinced by Skarpheðinn’s excuse that they are “*leita sauða þinna*,”<sup>80</sup> but his response to Skarpheðinn’s second excuse, that they are fishing for salmon, clearly intimates that he is aware that his sons will take revenge against Sigmundr that night, and that he supports it: “*Vel væri þat, þó at svá væri, at þá veiði bæri eigi undan*.”<sup>81</sup> The scene is reproduced before the slaying of Þráinn:

*En þann morgun inn sama, er þeir Þráinn riðu austan, þá vaknaði Njáll snimma ok heyrði, at öx Skarpheðins kom við þilit. Stendr þá Njáll upp ok gengr út;*

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid* 250.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

<sup>80</sup> “Searching for your sheep.” *ÍF* XII, 115.

<sup>81</sup> “If that is so, then it would be good not to let the prey slip away.” *ÍF* XII, 115.

...  
*Njáll kallaði á Skarphéðin: "Hvert skal fara, frændi?"*  
*"Í sauðaleit," sagði hann.*  
*"Svá var ok eitt sinn fyrr," segir Njáll, "ok veidduð þér þá men."*<sup>82</sup>

It is notable that this pattern is not fully repeated for a third time when, under Morðr's influence and the cover of night, the Njálssons leave Bergþórshvål to kill Höskuldr Þráinnsson. This absence is noted by Njáll when Bergþóra inquires as to their plans: "*Ekki em ek í ráðagerð með þeim,*" segir Njáll; "*Sjaldan var ek þá frá kvaddr er hin góðu váru ráðin.*"<sup>83</sup> It is crucial to the narrative that Njáll not find out about their plans, as he would surely put a stop to them. Njáll supports his sons' killings only when their cause is just, in accordance with the old ethic that the aforementioned proverb exemplifies.

Even then, Njáll is aware that the hand's blow will soon be returned, though it may initially offer joy. Indeed, Njáll twice utters a proverb that indicates this awareness. Though Bergþóra agitates her sons to take vengeance for Sigmundr's slander, Njál warns "*Ok ferr svá um mörg mál, þó at menn hafi skapraun af, at jafnan orkar tvímælis, þó at hefnt sé,*"<sup>84</sup> and Njáll later cautions Grim and Helgi in taking revenge for the dishonor they suffer in Norway due to the dishonesty of Þráinn: "*Eigi er slíkt svá óvant . . . Þat kann ok vera, at mælt sé, at synir mínir sé seinir til atgerða, ok skuluð þér þat pola um stund, því at allt orkar tvímælis, þá er gört er.*"<sup>85</sup> Though the composer's version of Njáll – who can be assumed to have the level of cultural literacy necessary to be familiar with the thrice-uttered 'hand' proverb by virtue of his oft-remarked wisdom and notable paroemial inventory – may recognize the danger inherent to this feud dynamic, in the case of his sons he condones it.

The killing of Höskuldr, however, is essentially unjustified, as the Hvítanessgoði has refused to avenge his father's death, representing the new ethic directly from his fostering by Njáll. As Einar Ól. Sveinsson observes, Höskuldr's character is strong enough to overcome the expectation of vengeance and, while Njáll supports his sons in their acts of justified vengeance,

<sup>82</sup> "That same morning that Þráinn and his men rode from the east, Njáll woke early and heard Skarphéðin's axe strike the wall. Njáll stood up and went out . . . Njáll called to Skarphéðinn: 'Where are you going, son?' 'To search for sheep,' he said. 'So it was once before,' said Njáll, 'yet you were hunting men.'" *ÍF* XII, 231-2.

<sup>83</sup> "I am not in counsel with them," said Njáll; 'seldom was I left out when their plans were good.'" *ÍF* XII, 280.

<sup>84</sup> "It happens in many cases where men's tempers have been tried that the effect is two-sided, even after vengeance has been taken." *ÍF* XII, 114 (*TPMA* 13, 463). The English passage appears as translated by Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 75.

<sup>85</sup> "This is not an easy matter . . . It may also happen that people will say that my sons are slow to take action, and you must put up with that for a while, for the effect of every action is two-sided." *ÍF* XII, 229 (*TPMA* 13, 463). The English passage appears as translated by Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 154.

Höskuldr represents something of a ‘true’ son to Njáll, exemplifying the new ethic for which Njáll and his sons must perish in order to suffer retribution for this illegitimate killing.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, by the time of his and his sons’ deaths, Njáll’s understanding of the new ethic appears to have matured from the time of the Ámundi episode. This change can more than likely be attributed to a reconsideration of values brought on by Höskuldr’s death, a tragic demonstration that (to use Hamer’s terms) where there is justice without mercy, as in the Ámundi episode, the reciprocatory killings of the old feud ethic will persist, and peace will be unsustainable. Thus the killing of Höskuldr, uncondoned by Njáll and wrought not out of legitimate reciprocation but through the sinister insinuations of Morðr, truly “*af illum rótum hefir upp runnit*.”

In light of these observations, we can now begin to expand our understanding of proverbs and their compositional role in *Njála*. As Richard Harris observes, the paroemial material found in the sagas can be approached as

partially extant evidence of the early existence of this much larger and more complex oral repository of wisdom formulas central to the ethics and mores of the pre-literate culture. In fact, it must in its immanent entirety have delineated those conceptual structures describing the behavioral expectations not only of the pre-literate society of Iceland but also of its inhabitants’ continental forebears. Such a repository was so deeply embedded in the consciousness and of such profound psychic impact that it informed, at least in part, the very thinking even of the literate and in some cases highly educated composers of the sagas, as well as that of the characters whose utterances and undertakings they described.<sup>87</sup>

A proverb, when included in the speech of a character by the composer, acts as an allusion to and affirmation of the modes of understanding that direct their characters. Despite writing perhaps centuries removed from the events of their narrative, the composer is at some level capable of relating to the often historical characters of their sagas, enough that they are able to identify and elucidate the reasoning of those characters’ actions by making reference to the paroemial material which embodied such patterns of thought and persists in their own understandings. The base of wisdom that influenced the figures of their histories persists in the cognitive patterning of the sagaman or composer. In turn, such a conclusion implies that not only do the composer and his characters think in such patterns, but their intended audience also adheres to these cognitive structures in ways that supplement their reception of the texts. The audience of these texts, possessing the same *paroemial cognitive patterning* as the composer and the characters within

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<sup>86</sup> Sveinsson, *Masterpiece*, 167-72.

<sup>87</sup> Harris, “Eddic Wisdom,” 17.

his work, becomes a participant in the text, anticipating the directing forces and outcomes of narrative events through the shared cognitive patterning of audience, composer, and subject, and have their anticipations confirmed in their demonstration and affirmation in paroemial and therefore recognizable terms. Paroemial cognitive patterning, for the saga audience, is an awareness of and adherence to the cultural norms, mechanisms, and formulaic or generic influences on modes of understanding that exist inside and persist outside the text, either in the social reality or cultural memory of the audience. Within this closed system, Taylor's "incommunicable quality" includes an unconscious or experiential understanding of culturally-specific situations and contexts to which a paroemial statement appeals.

Thus, paroemial cognitive patterning operates on the principle of recognition through intertextuality, where 'text' can be extended to include a shared body of wisdom, as well as the formal and generic conventions that are associated with it. However, this mechanism allows not only for the recognition and comprehension of paroemial material within the shared cognitive context of the sagas or related texts, but also for the generation of new proverbs and the creation of proverb-scenes that exemplify associated paroemial material and further reinforce such material's bearing on the interpretation of the text as a whole. The literate medieval composers of these texts draw from recognizable paroemial forms to create scenes, episodes, and narratives that already contain the proverbial frameworks for their interpretation. These proverb-scenes may be already extant in some form in the inventory of stories and wisdom that contains and supplies the cognitive framework of their works (e.g. stock scenes typical of saga literature, or the scriptural image of the Sower), but they can be reworked by the composer and populated with the characters of their saga. Paroemial formulas such as metaphor ("evil roots" and "evil seeds"), apothegmatic statements ("evil from evil plans"), and formulaic anticipatory remarks ("the hand's joy in the blow is brief"), designed to carry proverbial weight, are then given such weight by the composer, being incorporated into the narrative structure through their 'unfolding' into scenes and being uttered as readily-available encapsulations of narrative events.

In his extensive study of the influence of Christian material on the composition of *Njála*, Hamer observes that "the problem of source identification stems primarily from the fact that the author's knowledge is usually fully assimilated into the rhetorical tone and ideology of the saga."<sup>88</sup> In the case of the scenes shown here, much of the rhetorical tone of the saga can be

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<sup>88</sup> Hamer, "Christian Background," 12.



attributed to the paroemial cognitive patterning evident in the composition of *Njála*. It has been shown that the composer of *Njála* has made deliberate and widespread use of proverbs in the composition of his text, constructing recurring scenes around emblematic proverbs and signaling the thematic concerns of the work as a whole in paroemial terms. It has also been shown that the paroemial form is used in *Njála* not only for explicit recourse to a base of wisdom originating in the pre-literate and pre-Christian culture of Iceland, but also as a mechanism by which the wisdom texts of the new ethic, the Christian scriptural tradition, can be assimilated into a pre-existing cultural framework of rhetoric, as Hamer identifies in the evil seeds and evil roots from which Höskuldr's death springs.

That the composer of *Njála* constructs these proverbial scenes, making use of both pre-Conversion and Christian wisdom in the same ways, suggests that this newer, post-literate tradition of scriptural wisdom was in the process of assimilation into a pre-existing wisdom tradition at the time of the saga's composition. The proverbial scenes of *Njála* are used compositionally in similar ways, and expanded and associated with new mythic-historical affirmations of their validity in scenic and paroemial terms. As Susan Deskis states in her discussion of a pre-Christian Germanic tradition of gnomic wisdom, "a pre-existing generic frame may absorb material from any source, and in the case of proverbial material, sources are especially nebulous."<sup>89</sup> The corpus of proverbial wisdom is here in the process of expansion, as the composer does not simply rely on the implicit authority of proverbial material, but uses it structurally to appeal to the audience's understanding of the social world of both their pagan past and their Christian present, constructing a narrative that treats in detail the transition between the two. Moreover, these recurring scenes are interdependent and intertextual, building from one another through the transition from pre-Conversion to Christian social ethics using the same literary and rhetorical mechanism, that of the actualization of proverbial material through recognizable scenes that evaluate the characters and the conflicts in which they find themselves. Through these examples, one may argue that *Njála*'s composer was actively participating in the creation and reinforcement of proverbial material through the formulaic construction of his narrative, within the structure of his audience's paroemial cognitive patterning. Building from Arora and Winick's arguments, proverbiality can be seen as inherent to a statement that is

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<sup>89</sup> Susan Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, vol. 155 of *Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1996), 140.

recognizable through the paroemial cognitive patterning of its audience, be it in the generic sense of following the typical syntactic, metaphoric, and formulaic qualities of recognizable proverbs, or by making reference to culturally-recognizable concepts or contexts with which the audience has familiarity and from which it can predict the outcome based on cultural understandings or methods of relation, or by reference to a similar and culturally familiar situation. The compositional strategies of these related scenes can be seen not as the end result of a transmission of paroemial wisdom, but as part of the process of that transmission, using the forms and expectations of the proverb genre and its audience to generate new proverbial material within the framework of a shared cognitive patterning.

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